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ABSTRACT

Efforts to discover what variables affect news media content have taken many approaches during the past 35 years. These approaches have emphasized psychological factors, sociological factors, cultural and social forces, and economic factors. Evidence exists that all these forces play a role in determining what becomes news. To examine how these factors interrelate to affect content, a study presented a model that describes how economic and newsroom-related variables can affect newspaper content. Data, 620 local stories involving government, public school education, business, and law enforcement, were obtained for a 1-week time period from 21 large circulation and prestige newspapers. Thirty-nine variables were coded in the content analysis of each story, and several factors were developed to assure consistent and accurate measurement. Results showed a connection between the economic environment, newsroom variables, and variation in the content of these local news stories. Findings suggest that (1) group ownership had a relatively strong effect on staff size and, therefore, an impact on content; (2) as intensity of competition increased, the staff size for a given amount of news copy increased; (3) a positive relationship exists between intercity competition and fairness; and (4) the influence of the average reporter story load on content, while in the direction expected, was much smaller than anticipated. (One figure and 77 notes are included.) (MS)

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The Relationships Among Economic, Newsroom and Content Variables: A Path Model

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Efforts to discover what variables affect news media content have taken many approaches during the past 35 years. These approaches have emphasized psychological factors,[1] sociological factors,[2] cultural and social forces[3] and economic factors.[4] Evidence exists that all these of forces have a role in determining what becomes news. However, how these factors interrelate to affect content is not fully understood. The purpose of this study is to present a model based on theory and previous research that will describe how economic and newsroom-related variables can affect newspaper content. Hypotheses about the nature and direction of causal influences will also be tested.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The most common economic factors looked at in content studies are ownership and competition, with research in both areas dating from the 1940s and 1950s. Various economic and management theories suggest that both newspaper ownership and competition might affect the content of newspapers. However, different theories involve different mechanisms and degree of impact.

Ownership should affect content because different owners have different goals for their newspapers, and they allocate their resources accordingly.[5] While the traditional goal of a business organization is to maximize profits,[6] several theorists suggest other goals are pursued by organizations. Williamson said managers would maximize their own utility. Because of detachment of management from ownership in some corporations, managers could spend money on whatever gave them utility as long as the profits were adequate to keep stockholders satisfied.[7] Baumol said

managers would tend to maximize sales revenue with a minimal level of profit in markets with few firms. In these cases, market shares would be more important than profit.[8] Marris suggested that firms would maximize the present value of the firm's future stream of sales revenue in an effort to maximize the firm's growth.[9]

In contrast to these maximization theories, Cyert and March argued that people in organizations do not maximize or even have a single goal. They suggested that organizations act as a result of an interactive process among power centers within an organization.[10]

These different theories of owner and manager goals have received various levels of support.[11] It seems clear, however, that different owners may have different goals. The different goals affect newspaper content through the allocation of resources, such as budgets, staffing and newspaper space.

The possible impact of competition on newspapers is as complex as that of ownership. There are several different types of competition facing newspapers and there are different types of microeconomic theories that might be applicable to newspaper markets. Newspaper content could be related to competition with other newspapers in the same city (direct competition) and with newspapers in nearby cities (intercity competition). Direct competition means competition within a city among general circulation newspapers. This falls into two types: competition between or among separately owned and operated newspapers; and competition between newspapers that have a joint operating agreement. While the former serves readers better than the

latter, the latter is generally superior to a single-newspaper market.[12] Direct competition has become relatively scarce, with only 23 cities remaining with direct competition and 19 with JOAs.[13]

The area of intercity newspaper competition has attracted attention during the past 20 years. It was labeled umbrella competition in 1975 by Rosse,[14] and its growth has resulted in several recent studies. Umbrella competition occurs when newspapers located in different cities compete for readers. Usually, the cities are close geographically, if not adjacent. An example is a large metropolitan daily competing with a suburban daily or weekly.

Competition among the newspapers can occur in the areas of circulation, advertising and news coverage. Since circulation is related to content and price, and advertising is related to circulation and price, newspaper content affects both circulation and advertising linage.

The key factor in competition among news media is the degree of substitutability of the information content. As the substitutability of other newspapers, magazines and broadcast news programs increases, a newspaper must react by differentiating itself. This process of differentiation is described by the theory of monopolistic competition.[15] While the theory is not strictly applicable to newspapers because it assumes many sellers in a market, the product differentiation aspect of the theory has been applied to newspapers.[16]

There are many ways for a newspaper to differentiate itself, ranging from geographic distribution and news coverage to nature

and quality of the writing. As with ownership, the mechanism through which competition affects content is the allocation of budget and space.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Both ownership and the various types of competition have received extensive study since the end of World War II. Results conflict. These conflicting results have been caused by variations in research design, variable definitions, sample size, and the theoretical basis for research. This section will review research to develop a model to be tested.

Newspaper Ownership Research

Newspaper ownership has become an issue because of the trend toward group ownership during this century. By 1984, 64 percent of all daily newspapers were owned by 161 groups.[17] As groups have purchased more newspapers, some newspaper critics and scholars have become concerned about the effects of group ownership on newspaper content. These concerns about content include the fear that group ownership lowers local autonomy to pursue news and editorial issues and that group ownership results in an overemphasis on profit through cutting costs and reducing newspaper quality.[18] There is also a concern that group ownership will reduce diversity of opinions in the marketplace of ideas.[19] All of these possibilities reflect the ability of management and ownership to pursue various types of goals.

The concerns about group ownership have been tested with conflicting results. Some anecdotal evidence indicates group ownership can lower newspaper quality,[20] but there is also evidence that group ownership improves newspaper quality.[21]

Statistical studies also conflict about the impact of ownership. Grotta found little difference when he compared newspapers that changed from independent to group ownership with a control sample. The control sample, however, included group newspapers that did not change ownership.[22] Drew and Wilhoit studied the newshole distribution of 149 newspapers by surveying editors.[23] They found no significant differences in the way newsholes were allocated. However, editors are not always accurate in estimating space allocation.[24]

Another interest concerning groups has been the impact of ownership on editorial page content. These studies are again mixed, with some showing an impact from group ownership[25] and others showing no relationship between group ownership and editorials.[26] Based on these results, it appears group policies toward editorial pages vary with the group. Thus, the particular group is a more useful measure of group impact on editorial pages than the whether or not the newspaper is owned by a group.

A study of ownership impact on conflict coverage in Minnesota newspapers found that newspapers owned by groups with headquarters outside of the state carried significantly less conflict reporting about local governments than independently owned newspapers and group newspapers with headquarters inside Minnesota.[27]

A study by Becker, Beam, and Russial found a significant correlation between number of newspapers owned by a company and a quality index, but the ownership independent variable was really a measure of the number of newspapers owned by a company and not the difference between group and non-group newspapers.[28] Litman

and Bridges studied the effects of groups on financial commitment and found that, as the number of newspapers in a group increased, the number of reporters and number of lines of news content decreased. However, the study did not control for the size of newspaper.[29]

Lacy controlled for circulation size in his study of 114 newspapers, two-thirds of which were owned by groups.[30] He found that ownership had no impact on the allocation of news space, but it had a limited effect on budget allocation. Groups had a smaller percentage of their total newspaper space given to news and editorial material, but they had a larger staff for a given amount of space.

Demers and Wackman found there were some differences in perception of organizational goals between managers of group-owned newspapers and managers of independent newspapers.[31] Independent newspaper managers were more likely to emphasize community service as an organizational goal, while group newspaper managers were more likely to emphasize profit as a goal. However, as the authors noted, the survey response rate was very low.

Although research results are mixed, there is enough evidence that group ownership has some impact on allocation of resources to encourage further testing. The problem is that the exact impact may be a result of individual management goals, which make drawing generalizations based on group ownership difficult.

Direct Newspaper Competition Research

Research results concerning competition and daily newspaper content conflict, as does research about group ownership.

However, recent research in this area has indicated that competition can have an impact on content through the allocation of resources.

Most studies conducted during the 1950s found little impact of competition on newspaper news and editorial content.[32] However, Kearl looked into the impact of competition on press service resources in 728 newspapers.[33] The author concluded monopoly newspapers of less than 15,000 circulation carried fewer wire services than did competitive newspapers of the same size. Monopoly newspapers of more than 15,000 tended to carry more press services than did competitive newspapers.

Weaver and Mullins compared content and format characteristics of leading and trailing newspapers in 23 of the 31 competitive markets.[34] The trailing newspapers tended to have a larger newshole, and leading newspapers averaged 3.7 news services as compared to 2.6 for trailing newspapers. Becker, Beam and Russial re-analyzed the data from the New England Study and found no relation between competition and the quality index the researchers used.[35] Entman re-analyzed data from the University of Michigan Center for Political Studies and found little effect of competition on diversity of content.[36] McCombs' case study of Cleveland found results consistent with Entman's.[37]

A longitudinal study by Rarick and Hartman used the intensity of competition as the independent variable instead of a categorical measure of presence or absence of competition.[38] They examined content in periods when a newspaper had no competition, when it had intense competition and when it had minimal competition. The percentage of space given local news and

features, pictures, and columns of opinions was significantly greater during intense competition than during minimal or no competition.

There have been two partial replications supporting the Rarick and Hartman study. The first found that local news coverage declined after competition disappeared in the markets,[39] and the second found that intense competition increased local coverage.[40]

In addition to the studies of newspapers in the United States, two studies of Canadian newspapers dealt with competition and content. The first found that, without competition, the surviving newspapers in two Canadian markets had smaller newsholes, less space devoted to coverage of city hall, and more of a dependence on higher profile sources for news.[41] The second studied the content of two Canadian markets that changed from competitive to non-competitive.[42] It concluded that competition had no socially significant effect on the content of these two newspapers.

In a cross-sectional study, Litman and Bridges found that competitive newspapers had more wire services and lines of news than did non-competitive newspapers.[43] In a study that used the intensity of competition measure, Lacy found no relationship between competition and number of reporters, but newspapers in intensely competitive markets tended to have more reporters for a given amount of space and more wire services than did newspapers in slightly competitive or non-competitive markets.[44] Intensity proved to be a better predictor than just the presence or absence of a competing newspaper.

These results are consistent with those of Litman and Bridges, who called this effect the "financial commitment theory." This means that competition leads to a greater expenditure on the information product. This is consistent with the product differentiation approach of monopolistic competition theory. Greater resources allow greater flexibility in differentiating a newspaper from competitors.

Competition also results in increased allocation of resources to content in ways other than wire services and staffing. A study found that, as competition intensified, newspapers tended to increase front page use of color and graphics, which required greater expenditures on the part of the newspapers.[45]

Intercity Newspaper Competition

While the study of intercity competition has grown during the past 10 years, most of the studies have not examined the impact of this competition on daily newspaper content. Studies have looked at the impact of this "umbrella competition" on advertising and circulation content[46] and the impact of central market structure on suburban newspapers.[47]

A relatively recent study deals with the actual content of newspapers and its relationship to intercity competition.[48] This study found that, as the intensity of intercity competition increased among daily newspapers, the percentage of total newshole given local news and the percentage of total newspaper space given the newshole increased. This is consistent with the need of a daily to differentiate itself by increasing its coverage of local news. As with intracity competition, the intensity of competition within a market, which means the share

of the market, is more important than the number of newspapers. A newspaper with a small proportion of circulation in the market has little impact on the dominant newspaper.

Relationship of Economic Factors to Newsroom Influences on Content

Overall, it appears that there is a relationship between newspaper competitive intensity and the allocation of resources. As competition increases, so does financial expenditure. There is also some evidence that ownership has an impact on budget expenditures, with group newspapers having larger staffs per given amount of space.

While these relationships hold the possibility of affecting content, there has been little effort to connect the economic factors to changes in quality of newspaper coverage. Stempel found that a cross-media monopoly within a town resulted in less comprehensive content in the media.[49] The reduction in comprehensive content resulted in people within the city being less well informed than people in two control communities.

Although they were not looking at economic factors, Danielson and Adams found that completeness of coverage of the 1960 presidential race by 96 newspapers was related to staff size and to number of wires services.[50] Since research indicates that competition means larger staffs for a given amount of space and more wire services, these results suggest a possible impact of the financial commitment on newspaper quality through reporting resources.

The relationship between staff allocation and content has received examination from a sociological perspective. Tuchman

studied the structure of newspaper news-gathering systems and suggested that the beat system and interaction of organizations determined what became news.[51] Mark Fishman followed this research with a case study that found reporters had heavy story loads that forced them to pursue more in-depth projects on their own time, if at all.[52] A comparative case study of four suburban newspapers found that newspapers with small staffs tended to rely heavily on beat sources, especially on police, city hall and education beat sources.[53]

Within the newsroom, several studies have demonstrated how resource and time constraints can influence source use and, thereby, news content. In separate studies, Miller and Gans found that news organizations concentrate on highly visible sources to maximize the efficient use of scarce resources.[54] Dunwoody showed that reporters facing deadline and technological constraints had to rely for information on the information "control structure" of a scientific convention.[55] In separate studies, Fico showed that reporters who had to write more stories used fewer sources and different types of sources than reporters who had fewer production pressures.[56] He also found that the concerns reporters perceived in their editors influenced the kinds of stories written.

These newsroom studies of source use have direct bearing on two content areas of potential crucial importance to both readers and newspaper professionals: fairness and balance. Fairness and balance are called for by the codes of the Society of Professional Journalists/Sigma Delta Chi, the American Society of Newspaper Editors, and the Association of Press Managing

Editors.[87] Fairness can be plausibly claimed when all relevant perspectives or sides to a controversy are at least given the opportunity to be included in a story. Balance can be reasonably claimed when those relevant perspectives or sides are in fact given roughly equal attention in the stories.

Past research on the effect of production pressures on reporters has relevance for fairness and balance in stories. Reporters under significant production pressure cannot be expected to reach all the sources that may be appropriate or even necessary for a story. Given that constraint, stories may well be unfair in that important sources in a controversy may not be contacted, or attempts to contact such sources are made with insufficient persistence, to insure complete information. This then may lead to story imbalance, with one side to a controversy dominating story space.

Clearly too, fairness and balance are thereby related to defamation, which can have a financial impact on the well-being or even survival of news organizations. Litigation costs and jury damage awards cause a "chilling effect" even when media defendants prevail.[88] If reporters cannot reach all sources in a controversy, defamatory statements are more likely to go uncorrected, or even be included in a story simply because they seem manifestly true to the reporter. Indeed, a recent study found a relationship between fairness, balance and defamatory content in newspapers.[89] In that study, stories with more than one side of a controversy represented were less likely to have defamatory statements. Stories that tended to be imbalanced in amount of story space given to parties in a controversy also

tended to have more defamatory statements.

Given the prescriptive and empirical importance of fairness, balance and defamation, these content categories are the focus of the present investigation of the relation of economic and newsroom-related variables to content. Further, support exists in the newspaper economics and newsroom research literatures for the following hypotheses:

Economic Factors and Staff Allocation

(1) Group-owned newspapers will have larger staffs than non-group newspapers.

(2) As direct competition intensity increases, staff size will increase.

(3) As intercity competition intensity increases, staff size will increase.

Staff Allocation and Content

(4) As staff size increases, average reporter story load will decrease.

(5) As average reporter story load increases, fairness will decrease.

(6) As average story load increases, story imbalance will increase.

(7) As story fairness increases, defamation in news stories will decrease.

(8) As story imbalance increases, defamation in news stories will increase.

METHOD

Twenty-one large circulation and prestige newspapers were used in this study. These are among the best and largest in the

United States.[60] Of the newspapers, 12 had direct competition, eight did not and one was in a joint operating agreement. Measures for the economic variables were taken from existing data, while the measures of staff size, staff story load, balance, fairness and defamation were determined by a content analysis.

Group ownership was based on ownership listed in Editor & Publisher International Yearbook 1987.[61] The measure of intensity of direct competition was an index determined by subtracting the percentage of total market circulation for the trailing newspaper from the percentage total market circulation for the leading newspaper. The absolute value was used. This yielded a scale from zero to 100, with zero representing equal market shares, and therefore the most intense competition, and 100 representing no competition. When there were three newspapers in a city, the circulation percentage for the trailing newspaper was subtracted from the percentage of the leading newspaper to get intensity measures for these trailing papers. The percentage of the leading newspaper was subtracted from the percentage of the second place newspaper to get the intensity measure for the leading newspaper. Circulation figures for these newspapers was taken from Editor & Publisher International Yearbook 1987.[62] Because the scale has zero as the highest level of intensity, the signs of beta weights can be misleading. Therefore, the scale was multiplied by minus one to correct for this possibility of confusion.

The measure of the intercity competition was taken from Newspaper Circulation Analysis, 1986-1987.[63] The percentage of

households in the SMSA counties in which the newspaper was located that took other daily newspapers was the measure of intercity competition. As this percentage increased, competition within the SMSA increased. Since circulation has an effect on the resources available for distribution,[64] it was included as a control variable in the analysis.

Subscriptions for these newspapers were obtained for the week of April 21-26, 1986. The universe of local stories involving controversy and relating to local government, local public school education, local business, or local law enforcement were identified by two coders. A third coder examined those judgments and made the final decision to include or exclude the stories.[65] The 620 resulting stories were then clipped for further content analysis. Of these, 254 were from newspapers without competition and 366 were from competitive and joint operating agreement newspapers. Controversy coverage within the four types of stories was chosen because they are the ones most likely to need balance and fairness, and are most likely to have defamation in them.

Thirty-nine variables were coded in the content analysis of each story.[66] A detailed description of each of these variables was developed by the three coders and tested in trial runs involving newspapers not in the sample.[67] A coder reliability test was conducted on five stories after about 25 percent of the sample was coded. Variables that failed to achieve at least a 70 percent agreement among the three coders were dropped from subsequent analysis on grounds of unreliability.[68]

A words-per-inch formula that accounted for variations in type size, type density, and column widths was developed to

assure consistent and accurate measurement of story lengths. The most prominent entities in each story involving wrongdoing, impropriety or conflict were identified. Each story was coded for fairness by determining if the reporter successfully contacted those entities. The number of words from those entities quoted, paraphrased or cited from documents were counted. Story imbalance was determined by computing the absolute value of the difference in total words given each side of the story. The greater the difference, the more imbalanced the story. Finally, each story was coded for the presence of defamatory material and the context in which any defamatory material appeared.[69]

The two important newsroom variables were staff size and average reporter story load. The staff size was based on the number of reporters used to produce the four types of local stories studied. This number was determined by counting bylines. While this may underestimate the size of staff, it was the most convenient measure. A total number of reporters for the time studied was impossible to obtain and would have been inappropriate because it would have included reporters not working on the stories studied. The average reporter story load was determined by taking the average number of byline stories written by members of the staff. The average was used instead of individual reporter's stories because the authors were unable to identify when the work was done on all the stories. The average for the reporters seemed to be a less biased estimate of work load. It also controlled for the tendency of some reporters to simply want to produce more stories, and this tendency would

probably not be related to economic constraints.

Path analysis was used to test the study hypotheses and to develop a model that plausibly explained the interrelationships among the variables focused on in this study. A nonrecursive, ordinary least squares regression was conducted. The final model was constructed by retaining or deleting causal paths on the basis of statistical significance of the beta weights. Significant betas ($p < .05$) with appropriate signs were considered to demonstrate support for hypothesized relationships.

The economic variables of group ownership, direct competition intensity, intercity competition intensity and circulation were considered exogenous variables that influence the newsroom and content variables, but were not in turn influenced by them or any of the other variables in the model.[70] Specifically, staff size was considered to be directly influenced by the economic variables, as some media economics research literature indicates.

The newsroom variable of staff size was considered to directly influence the average reporter story load, and this story load was considered to influence story balance and fairness. These relationships are supported by the research literature. They are also intuitively plausible. More staff members means a reporter would have fewer stories to develop and more time to devote to individual stories. This should influence how vigorously and thoroughly a reporter searches for sources whose information would in turn influence story content. While newsroom variables influence story content variables, the opposite would not be the case.

Finally, story balance and fairness were considered to have a

direct influence on the presence or absence of defamation in the stories. These relationships too are supported in the literature and are intuitively plausible. Contacting all sides of a story would at least help to balance defamatory statements and perhaps result in their elimination.

RESULTS

Hypothesized Results

Only one of the three economic variables had the predicted relationship to staff size. Group ownership had a very large effect on staff size as predicted by Hypothesis 1. Group newspapers in this sample had larger staffs than non-group newspapers. However, intensity of direct competition had no significant effect on staff size, failing to support Hypothesis 2. Similarly, intercity competition had no significant effect on staff size, thus failing to support Hypothesis 3.

The newsroom variables generally performed as expected. Staff size had a negative, significant effect on story load, as predicted by Hypothesis 4. As predicted by Hypothesis 5, the greater the story load, the less likely a story was to have both sides of a controversial issue. However, Hypothesis 6 predicted that the greater the story load the more imbalanced individual stories would be. This was contradicted by findings.

Finally, hypothesized relationships among content variables were as expected. The more fair a story, as indexed by successful contact with more than one side of a controversial story, the less likely the story was to contain defamatory statements, thus supporting Hypothesis 7. As predicted by Hypothesis 8, the more imbalanced a story, the more likely it

would contain defamatory statements.

The Model

While only ownership was connected with staff size, several other relationships emerged in the model between economic, newsroom and content variables. Intensity of direct competition was negatively related to average reporter story load. Thus, the number of stories written by a reporter on newspapers facing intense competition were fewer. The opposite relationship was found with group ownership. Group newspapers reporters tended to write more stories than non-group newspaper reporters. This relationship runs counter to the effect on group ownership through staff size. It may represent either a large newshole or shorter stories for group newspapers.

Not all of the relationships of economic variables with content were through the newsrooms variables. Intensity of direct competition had negative relationships with story fairness and story imbalance. Newspapers facing intense competition were more likely to have balanced stories than newspapers facing little or no competition. Stories in intensively competitive newspapers were less likely to be fair. Intercity competition was positively related to story fairness. As intercity competition increased, stories were more likely to be fair.

Circulation, which is a surrogate measure for newspaper resources, had a direct effect both on newsroom variables and story imbalance. Counter-intuitively, the higher the circulation, the smaller the staff size, the higher the average story load, and the more imbalanced the stories. The relationship with staff size is inconsistent with existing

research.[71] However, it may reflect the limited nature of this sample. The relationship to story load is probably related to the correlation between circulation and newshole. As circulation increases, the actual size of newshole increases.[72] The authors are unsure why circulation is related to imbalance.

The relationships between newsroom variables and content variables generally were as expected. Newsroom staff size had a hypothesized relationship with average reporter story load, but was not otherwise directly related to content variables. Although not hypothesized, the intuitively plausible relationship of story fairness to balance was demonstrated in the model. As might be expected, the more fair the stories, as indexed by successful attempts to reach all parties to a controversy, the less imbalanced stories were.

CONCLUSIONS

Results of this study show a connection between the economic environment, newsroom variables and variation in the content of these local news stories. However, the study also contained some surprises that suggest additional research and the development of a model that involves a more extensive delineation of newsroom variables.

Group ownership had a relatively strong effect on staff size and, therefore, an impact on content. This result runs counter to the study by Litman and Bridges that found a negative relationship between staff size and group ownership.[73] The seeming contradiction is most likely due either to the nature of the samples used or differences in the way various groups treat the news departments of their newspapers.

The relationship between intensity of direct competition and the average reporter story load is consistent with Lacy's study that found as intensity of competition increased, the staff size for a given amount of news copy increased, which would mean less space to fill or fewer stories to write.[74] The connection between competition and story load coupled with the relationship between story load and fairness suggests that competition has an impact on news content, although the standardized beta between story load and fairness was relatively small.

The small impact of story load on fairness may be related to a problem with measuring story load. The measure used here was number of stories published by a reporter during the period studied. It was based on bylines found in the newspapers. A better measure would have been column inches of copy per reporter. In addition, a measure of stories that were being worked on that were not published during the period of study would have given an indication of additional work load.

The positive relationship between intercity competition and fairness also raise interesting prospects. Little work has been done about the impact of this type of newspaper competition on content. Since direct newspaper competition is rapidly diminishing, this battle among different layers of newspapers suggest a way to keep competitive forces alive in the industry. Result here are consistent with earlier work that found that percentage of newspaper given to the newshole and percentage of newshole given to city coverage both increased with intensity of intercity competition.[75]

The counter-intuitive negative relationship between average

reporter load and balance is an intriguing result. The authors are unable to suggest a definitive explanation. Perhaps, the fact that the sample was composed of large and prestige papers is involved. It may be that some these papers do not pursue balance as an objective. It also may reflect a measurement problem. Balance probably can be achieved without an equal distribution of space among sides of the controversy. Whatever the cause, this imbalance was connected with the presence of defamation in stories. If defamatory statement are to be avoided, this study emphasizes the need to understand the relationship that was found.

The influence of the average reporter story load on content, while in the direction expected, was much smaller than anticipated, especially in comparison to the effects of the economic variables. This finding does, however, support past research by Fico showing a relationship of story load to extensiveness of source use,[76] and to research by Dunwoody relating constraints on source searching by reporters to dependence on "control structure."[77]

SUMMARY

This model suggests two conclusions to guide further research. First, the economic environment sets bounds within which both prescriptive editorial injunctions and newsroom routines act on content. As earlier studies suggest, these constraints work through the staff size and work loads, although this appears not to be the only process through which economic constraints have an impact.

Second, the economic and sociological forces that interact to

affect content are quite complex. For example, the fact that intense competition results in decreased reporter story load, which results in more imbalanced stories, contrasts with the direct relationship of intense direct competition decreasing imbalance. Whatever the reasons for this relationship, the result that imbalanced stories tended to have more defamatory statements than balanced stories means the relationships need further study.

The limitations of this study may help prescribe such further research. The fact that only 21 prestige and large circulation newspapers were used and that only local controversial stories were studied, suggests a need for a study using larger samples of newspapers and story types. The measurement problem for story load mentioned above suggest the use of square inches per reporter as an additional measure for story load.

Future research should also focus more on the mechanisms by which these environmental and newsroom forces actually translate into newsgathering routines and reporter attitudes that influence story content. The relationship of other newsroom and individual variables, such as direct editorial injunctions, newsroom research resources, and reporter experience, should also be examined.

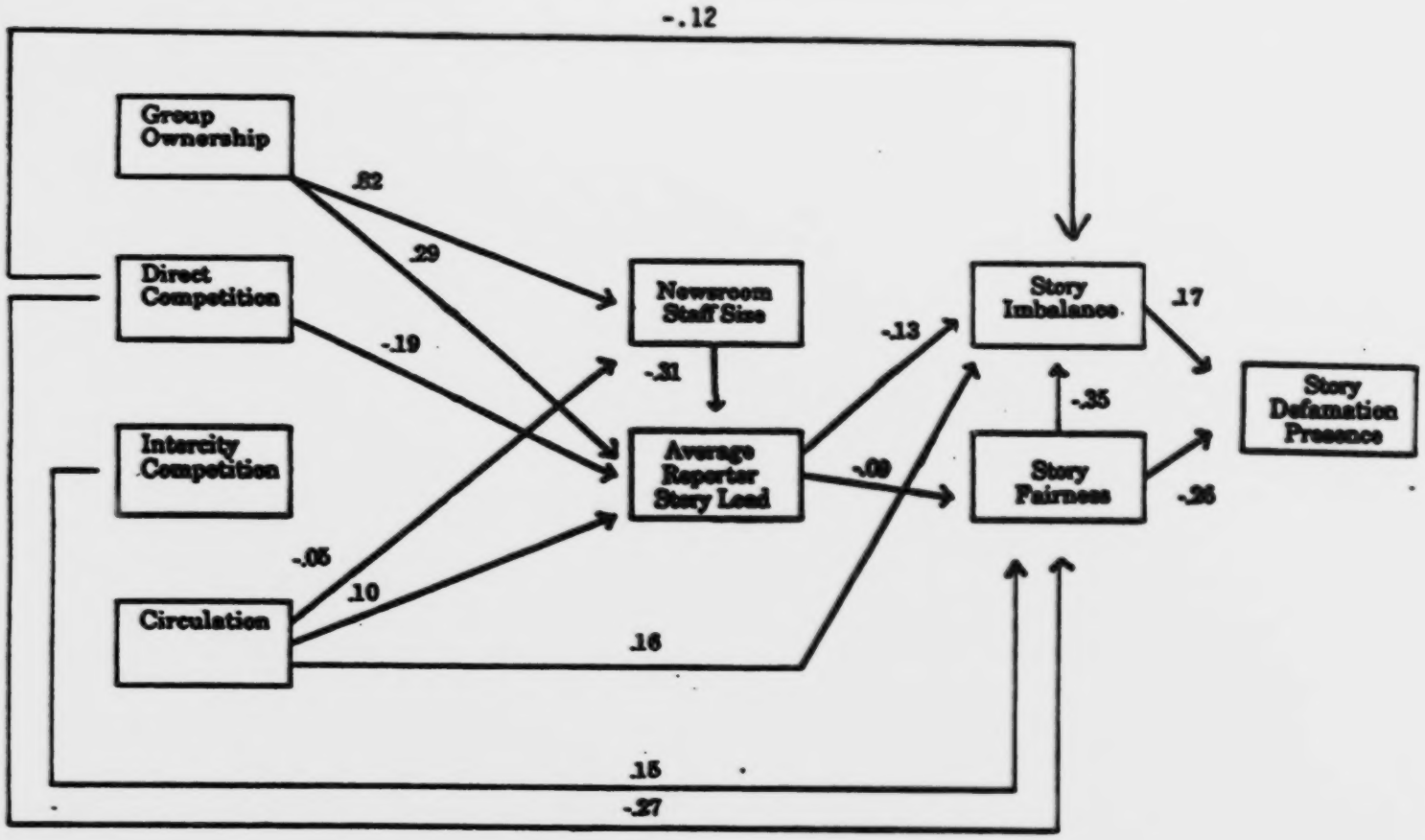

FIGURE 1 -- Model of relationships among economic, newsroom and content variables.

ENDNOTES

1 For examples, see John Dimmick, "The Gate-Keeper: An Uncertainty Theory," Journalism Monographs, No. 37, 1974; Walter Gieber, "Across the Desk: A Study of 16 Telegraph Editors," Journalism Quarterly, 33:425-32 (Fall 1956); David M. White, "The Gate Keeper: A Case Study in the Selection of News," Journalism Quarterly, 27:383-90 (Fall 1950); Paul B. Snider, "Mr. Gates Revisited: A 1966 Version of the 1949 Cas Study," Journalism Quarterly, 44:419-27 (Autumn 1967).

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65 Specifically, a local story had to be one that was bylined and that pertained to events transpiring within the standard metropolitan statistical area in which the newspaper's main editorial offices were located. No wire service material, syndicated material or opinion pieces were used.

In addition to being local, the story also had to include controversy. A story with controversy was one that included either wrongdoing, impropriety or conflict. A wrongdoing story was defined as one in which the primary focus was on assertions that an identifiable individual or organization violated legal standards, either civil or criminal. An impropriety story was one in which the primary focus was on the character or behavior of an identifiable person or organization and the story included the assertion that such a person or organization violated moral or ethical standards of a non-legal nature. A conflict story was one in which the primary focus was on explicit opposition on topics of public or private organizational policy which was represented by two or more parties from opposing positions.

Stories on which the original and "check" coders disagreed after discussion were excluded from analysis. The overall percentage of agreement between the original and "check" coder--before any discussion--averaged above 70 percent.

66 Copies of coding sheets, operational definitions and tests results are available from the authors.

67 Issues of newspapers not included in the sample were used for developing these variable definitions. Sample issues were subsequently used in coder reliability tests. The protocol containing these definitions is available upon request from the authors.

68 The variables excluded were the two specifically identifying the prominent entity types involved in the wrongdoing, impropriety or conflict in stories. The major coder difficulty involved disagreements over the order in which entities appeared in stories.

The overall percentage of agreement among coders for all the variables in the study was 78 percent.

69 Defamation was considered to be any statement "capable of injuring the reputation of an identifiable individual or organization." Specifically, the test used for defamation is that established by the courts: "Whether the words used are of such a type as to make reasonable readers in the community think less of the person written about."

If defamatory material was found, a subsequent judgment was made on whether the material was libelous per se -- that is, statements that "need no interpretation by the reader because the immediate and natural effect of the statement diminishes the estimation in which the individual reported upon is perceived." Defamation contexts included defamation occurring in official proceedings or documents, in direct or indirect quotations, and in unattributed assertions.

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